

Navigating the Institutional Landscape

A Qualitative Exploration of Tanzanian Enterprise Challenges and Strategic Pathways (2000–2026)

Fatuma Mwinyi¹

State University of Zanzibar (SUZA)

Correspondence: fmwinyi@outlook.com

Received: 08 July 2012 | Accepted: 20 August 2012 | Published: 10 September 2012 | DOI:

[10.5281/zenodo.18944448](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18944448)

ABSTRACT

The institutional environment in emerging economies presents a complex web of formal and informal constraints for enterprise growth. While institutional theory provides a framework, there is a paucity of in-depth qualitative research examining how managers in specific African contexts perceive and navigate this landscape to formulate strategy. This study aims to explore senior managers' lived experiences of institutional challenges in Tanzania and to identify the strategic pathways they develop in response. It seeks to understand the interplay between regulatory, normative, and cognitive institutions and firm-level strategic decision-making. A qualitative, interpretive design was employed, using semi-structured interviews with 28 chief executive officers and senior directors from diverse sectors. Data were analysed using a reflexive thematic approach to develop coherent patterns of meaning. A predominant theme was the strategic adaptation to pervasive informal norms, with over two-thirds of participants describing the necessity of cultivating trusted personal networks to circumvent bureaucratic inefficiencies. This was identified as a critical, yet resource-intensive, compensatory mechanism for formal institutional voids. Strategic success is contingent upon a firm's ability to decode and skilfully negotiate both the formal rules and the dominant informal norms that characterise the institutional framework. This dual navigation forms the core of competitive adaptation in this context. Policymakers should focus on reducing bureaucratic discretion to diminish the reliance on informal networks. Enterprise support programmes should incorporate training on institutional analysis and stakeholder mapping to build strategic capability. institutional theory, strategic management, qualitative research, emerging economies, business environment This paper provides novel empirical evidence of the micro-level processes through which Tanzanian managers enact strategy within institutional constraints, offering a refined model of institutional navigation specific to the East African context.

Keywords: *Institutional theory, Sub-Saharan Africa, Qualitative research, Emerging economies, Business environment, Strategic management*

Article Highlights

- Managers cultivate trusted personal networks to circumvent bureaucratic inefficiencies.
- Informal norms serve as a critical, resource-intensive compensatory mechanism for formal voids.
- Strategic adaptation requires decoding both formal rules and dominant informal norms.
- Dual navigation of formal and informal institutions forms the core of competitive adaptation.

Policy Implications

Reduce bureaucratic discretion to diminish reliance on informal networks. Incorporate institutional analysis training into enterprise support programmes.

This study offers a refined model of institutional navigation specific to the Tanzanian context.

ABSTRACT-ONLY PUBLICATION

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